



## Bureau of Land Management – Critical Incident Stress Management Program

# Reactions after a Critical Incident

### Immediately After the Event

#### The most commonly reported reactions after a critical incident include:

- Anxiety about being involved in a similar event
- Fear the safety of yourself or loved ones
- Preoccupation about the stressful event
- Avoidance of situations or thoughts that remind you of the incident
- Flashbacks where you mentally re-experience the event
- Physical symptoms: muscle tension, fatigue, headaches, nausea, bowel problems
- Decreased interest in usual activities
- Feelings of sad or loneliness
- Disbelief at what has happened; feeling numb, unreal, isolated, or detached from other people
- Insomnia, frequent awakening, disturbing dreams or nightmares
- Increased startle response
- Problems with concentration, or memory (especially aspects of the traumatic event)
- A misperception of time
- Guilt and/or self-doubt related to the traumatic event
- Anger or irritability at what has happened; at the senselessness of it all

### How to Handle the Next Few Days

- Do not be afraid of your feelings.
- Remind yourself that your actions are a normal result of trauma and should decrease over time and become less painful.
- Try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible; you may need to gradually introduce yourself to tasks that seem difficult.
- If you feel uncomfortable, scared or anxious, take some deep breaths and remind yourself that you are safe.
- Be kind and patient with yourself; engage in enjoyable and relaxing activities.
- Continue to talk to your family, friends and colleagues about the trauma.
- Even if you feel a bit distant from other people, do not reject genuine support.
- Work on your general stress levels; make sure that you have adequate sleep, a good diet and regular exercise.
- Practice relaxation techniques to help reduce nervous tension and insomnia.
- Remember that accidents are more common after severe stress; be more cautious in your activities.
- Allow yourself time to deal with the memories. There may be some aspects of the experience that will be difficult, if not impossible, to forget.
- If your reaction(s) continues to seriously disrupt your life, seek appropriate help



Certain severe traumatic events, however, threaten both the physical and mental health of wildland fire personnel. An unusually intense stress response may interfere with the body's immune system, rational thinking and one's emotions. Severe stress impairs a person's ability to respond to further challenges. Extreme stress disrupts performance and threatens health. It may leave permanent psychological scars if it is not managed carefully.

No one can work through the aftermath of a critical incident for you, but you do not have to go it alone. Keep an open mind. Allow your family, friends, and peers to help.

## Positive Recovery

Keep in mind that you are naturally resilient. If you do not feel good now, allow yourself some time to process the event. You will feel better over time. Positive recovery involves the following:

1. You will accept what happened. You will accept any experience of fear and any feelings of vulnerability as part of being human. Vulnerability is not helplessness.
2. You will accept that no one can control everything. You will keep a positive perspective.
3. You will learn and grow from the experience. You will be able to assess all future circumstances on their own merits. You will become stronger, more empathetic and more resilient.
4. You will include survivorship into your life perspective. You may re-evaluate life's goals, priorities, and meaning. You will gain wisdom from your survivorship.
5. You will be aware of changes in yourself that may contribute to problems at home, work, and other environments. You will work positively to overcome these problems.
6. You will increase the intimacy of your actions and communications with those you love. You will remain open to the feedback and care of those who love you.

## Family, Loved Ones, and Friends

Following a critical incident, especially those in which the individual could have been killed, some spouses and loved ones come to realize the true dangers of firefighting. The dangers of now feel much more real and generate firefighter-safety anxiety. In such cases, the reality of the critical incident has overwhelmed the psychological defenses which previously protected the spouse, partner or family members from the anxiety associated with the risks of firefighting.

It is important to know that the critical incident does not have to involve actual death or serious injury, nor must it involve the actual loved one working in fire. Families can be affected by what happens to firefighters that are not their husband, wife, or partner.

Individuals involved in critical incidents can help lessen spouse/family anxiety by openly discussing the dangers of firefighting and how they manage the risks or threat of the actual incident.

*Do not become a critical incident statistic.* Seek appropriate professional assistance if your relationship becomes troubled following involvement in a critical incident.



## Seeking Help

First responders may be reluctant to ask for help for fear of stigma; showing weakness, disciplinary action by their agency, not strong enough to the job etc. It is rare for firefighters, law enforcement and other to share their feelings of stress with one another and may be awkward for a comrade to even suggest someone seek help. A significant step in reducing this stigma is education, encouragement, and support from all levels.

Seeking assistance IS consistent with their image and in fact, demonstrates STRENGTH.



While in most instances the symptoms of critical incident stress will subside in a matter of weeks, there may be a few individuals who will suffer prolonged or permanent emotional trauma that can adversely affect their mental and physical health, relationships, careers, and daily functioning.

Take notice if you are experiencing any of the following: you are uncomfortable in your own skin, you are chronically afraid and/or hyper vigilant, you don't want to leave your safety zone; you have obsessive thoughts and compulsions to act on them. You feel profoundly depressed, hopeless, helpless, guilty, or have considered suicide. Your behavior has changed; you are more argumentative, engaging in fights, abusing alcohol or medication, or are taking increased unnecessary risks. Your mind cannot relax, you have repeated horrific nightmares, frequent intrusive explicit flashbacks, or you feel like you are not connected to yourself or your thoughts.